CHAPTER 10

Labour Control and Commodification Strategies Within a Food Delivery Platform in Belgium

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Introduction

Processes of 'datafication' and 'algorithmic control' are central in much recent research on labour platforms, which are defined as online tools that bring together and mediate between workers and customers for the exchange of paid labour (van Dijck, Poell and de Wall 2018; Wood et al. 2018). Arguments from the literature claim that the ways in which platforms technologically steer data collected from users and workers is at the core of 'platform capitalism' (Srnicek 2016). However, in-depth knowledge on the mechanisms enabling platforms to accumulate surplus value based on labour subordination remains somewhat limited. This requires focusing on the labour relationships underpinning 'algorithmic control' within platforms (Gandini 2019), which is the main analytical contribution of this chapter.

We focus on labour commodification, the process by which labour power is bought and sold as a commodity (Marx 1990). Together with Wood et al. (2019), we argue that commodification is key to explaining how platforms

How to cite this book chapter:
Franke, M. and Pulignano, V. 2022. Labour Control and Commodification Strategies Within a Food Delivery Platform in Belgium. In: Armano, E., Briziarelli, M., and Risi, E. (eds.), *Digital Platforms and Algorithmic Subjectivities*. Pp. 135–147. London: University of Westminster Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16997/book54.k.

achieve labour subordination by exposing workers to market exchange. Hence, we ask: what are the strategies labour platforms use to allocate labour efficiently by exposing workers to market exchange? How do the mechanisms and practices underpinning these strategies work and how do they account for the way in which platforms achieve labour subordination?

Understanding 'new' modes of capital valorisation under 'digital capitalism' requires looking at digital data (Srnicek 2016). Research illustrates that platforms optimise efficiency through workers' participation in the production of digital data (Attoh, Wells and Cullen 2019). However, data is not only generated by workers, but also by the platform's users (Van Doorn and Badger 2020). Accordingly, we argue that subordination through labour commodification occurs at the intersection of the relationships between platforms, workers and users (which we define as both individual clients and businesses such as restaurants).

Based on a qualitative study including interviews with workers (in this case couriers), clients, restaurants and the platform management within a food delivery platform (FD-Plat – an anonymised acronym) in Belgium, we illustrate how platforms foster commodification through what we call an 'empowerment cycle' and a 'disempowerment cycle', consisting of a series of recurrent practices and mechanisms that simultaneously support and constrain workers, restaurants and clients. Digital data collection and processing involved in these cycles continually boost the platform's capacity to control users and workers while purportedly providing them with autonomy. We argue that labour control and subordination emerge from these commodification strategies, enabling capital accumulation by the platform. We refer to Wright's (2000) definition of exploitation whereby the subordinated worker is excluded from access to certain means of production. In the following sections, we first theoretically frame our argument, then we present the methodology before setting out the findings. Finally, we discuss and conclude.

Bringing 'Work' Back into Labour Platforms

Current definitions point to labour platforms as technological tools that allow for the organisation of interactions and transactions between users and workers online. This is often referred to as a 'triangular' work relationship (Duggan et al. 2020; Schörpf et al. 2017) where digital technology is key in bringing together supply and demand for labour (Graham and Woodcock 2018). However, conceiving labour platforms merely as 'market intermediaries' (Harris and Krueger 2015) is insufficient to fully grasp platform work. A critical understanding requires positioning platform work within the labour relationships characterising 'platform capitalism', considering them as capitalist relations of production (Joyce 2020; Srnicek 2016). We argue that commodification is an important Marxian theoretical category to clarify how subordination within

platform work evolves. By circumventing intervention from trade unions and other labour market intermediaries (Pulignano 2019), labour platforms have acquired unprecedented control over the compensation for and the organisation of work. Labour platforms can hire workers by the task and undercut statutory minimum wages (Huws 2014) while providing no social protection (De Stefano 2016). This all takes place under the 'façade' of self-employment (Shapiro 2020), with *de facto* subordinated workers often misclassified as independent contractors (Cherry and Aloisi 2017). To control workers, platforms often use algorithms and other technological infrastructure to collect and monetise data (Vallas 2019). We argue that digital data management accounts for the way in which novelty is brought to work and performed within labour platforms through commodification. Hence, studying the mechanisms and practices through which commodification occurs is essential to understand how platforms dominate labour processes.

Uncovering Commodification in Platform Work

Platforms collect and process large amounts of data that users generate themselves when accessing platform services (van Dijck, Poell and de Waal 2018). Platforms then offer third parties access to these data (Helmond 2015), or transform data into 'desired' outputs through algorithms. 'Algorithmic management' is often defined as a control system where self-learning algorithms execute decisions, thereby limiting human involvement in the labour process (Möhlmann and Zalmanson 2017). However, together with Moore (2019) we claim that such a view risks reifying algorithms at the expense of underplaying the importance of the capital-labour relations underpinning platform capitalism. It is not the use of algorithms that accounts for platforms tracking workers (Duggan et al. 2020), but rather it is the power of capital over labour that explains how 'algorithmic management' effectively works (Rosenblat and Stark 2016). We identify two implications for the study of platform work.

First, labour platforms repurpose capitalist relations in a new environment where workers are constantly monitored and evaluated (Schor and Attwood-Charles 2017), eliciting a qualitative intensification of work (Wood et al. 2019). Second, platforms govern access to data as a commodity (Jabagi et al. 2019). We argue that generated digital data is then used to increase efficiency in labour allocation and in the decision-making of users. We consider that studying the mechanisms and practices through which this occurs is essential in order to understand the platform as a 'place' where control is enacted upon workers (Gandini 2019). As we will illustrate in the following sections, this points to a need to analytically and empirically reconsider the 'triangular' platform-user-worker relation as one allowing the accumulation of capital from labour exploitation. It also requires acknowledging the importance of digital data, by exploring platforms' commodification strategies. Specifically, we explain how

these strategies account for control by simultaneously empowering and disempowering users and workers at the intersection of their relationships with the platform.

Research Design and Methodology

Context

Digitalisation has fostered deregulation in Belgium (Basselier, Langenus and Walravens 2018), in turn potentially undermining collective bargaining and the social protection system (Van Gyes, Segers and Henderickx 2009). Notably, the 'De Croo law' allows certain platforms to use the so-called 'peer-to-peer' category, exempting platform work for up to €6,340 per year from taxes and social contributions between 2018–2020. Food delivery platforms benefited from this regulation, and were able to grow rapidly while circumventing workers' employment protections. A large share of Belgian workers engaging in food delivery work are young students, economically dependent on their parents. However, others combine platform work with a main job as an employee, or are self-employed in other work, and yet others rely on platform work as their sole source of income (Drahokoupil and Piasna 2019). Looking specifically at FD-Plat, the platform hires couriers under various self-employed statuses or within a peer-to-peer category. Originally, payment for all couriers consisted of a minimum amount for picking up and delivering food plus a variable fee depending on the distance to the client. However, after the Belgian tax authorities challenged the classification of couriers under the peer-to-peer heading, FD-Plat switched to a fixed fee for these workers in October 2019 and removed workers' ability to view a client's location before accepting an order.

Data Collection and Analysis

The research was conducted in Leuven, Brussels, Antwerp and Gent, cities with varying degrees of urban concentration. We conducted semi-structured interviews with couriers, restaurants managers, clients and the platform management. We interviewed 37 couriers between December 2018 and March 2020, diversifying respondents by employment status and the combination of platform work with other employment. Most couriers are men in their twenties (Drahokoupil and Piasna 2019), but we also included five women and some older couriers. Interviews with restaurant managers, clients and the platform management were conducted in early 2020. Five restaurants selling different kinds of food were selected. Clients were one student and two employees who used FD-Plat to order food. Our research also benefited from secondary data, especially the platform's website and a social media community used by couriers.

Additionally, we used participatory observation, with one of the researchers becoming a platform client and using the payment and rating system. This information proved useful to verify and complement data gathered in the interviews. Both primary and secondary data were analysed and encoded following an abductive approach, moving back and forth between data, concepts and categories (Blaikie 2007). In particular, our interest in the concepts of commodification and control informed the analysis, but a much deeper understanding of these phenomena was obtained by analysing the themes emerging from the collected data.

Findings

Cycles of Labour Commodification

FD-Plat's business model relies on collecting and processing vast amounts of data. Data is collected through three digital applications – one for clients, one for couriers and one for restaurants – which monitor all their activities, choices, locations and contact details. Data is analysed by the platform's back-office staff and then used to strategically expand choices and support decision-making by restaurants and clients. Moreover, it is fed into a self-learning algorithm which makes increasingly accurate predictions of users' and couriers' behaviour as more and more data is collected, contributing to increased delivery efficiency. Data collection and processing are at the heart of the platform's market expansion, enabling FD-Plat to enhance efficiency, while at the same time empowering and disempowering both users and couriers through commodification.

The Empowerment Cycle

As shown in the upper right-hand side of Figure 10.1, FD-Plat offers an extensive choice of meals to clients, which can quickly be delivered at any time of the day.

The collection of client data allows for the personalisation of the food delivery service, tailoring the choice of meals and special offers to client preferences. During 2019–2020, FD-Plat used this data to expand to one thousand new restaurants, hence enlarging client choice while increasing competition among restaurants:

> The reason why I started ordering through [name of platform] is because they have such an extensive offer. I don't mind leaving the house to get food, but sometimes the restaurant is far away or it's difficult to pick up the food. Then I use [name of platform] to order, which is much faster. (Client 2)

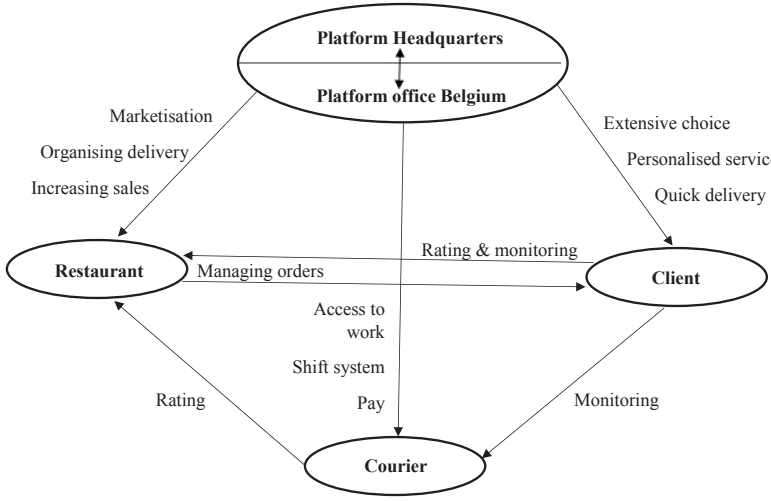

Figure 10.1: The Empowerment Cycle. Diagram by the authors.

As shown by the client ➔ restaurant/courier arrows in Figure 10.1, the client application monitors in real-time when food is being prepared and where the courier is. Clients can rate restaurants using a five-star rating system and, also, possibly adding a comment. The platform processes the collected data and transfers it as 'use value' to restaurants, which can access their ratings and other statistics, such as the 'preparation time statistic' or how well sales are doing. The upper left-hand side of Figure 10.1 illustrates that FD-Plat empowers restaurants through marketisation. For example, the platform's back-office staff in Belgium exchanges data with the company's corporate headquarters (see the circle at the top of Figure 10.1) and uses it to offer targeted marketing advice:

> For example, we tell the restaurant 'Have you heard of this new dish, the poke bowl? It's popular in France, it will come to Belgium as well. Don't you want to include it in your menu?' (FD-Plat management)

The restaurant application enables restaurants to choose the dishes and prices shown to clients, and to manage incoming orders. Moreover, FD-Plat supports restaurants by organising the delivery service on their behalf. As a result, restaurants gain access to a large pool of new online clients, boosting their sales:

> One advantage of working with [name of platform] is that many more people get to know you. (Restaurant 2)

> One third of the dishes we prepare now are for delivery via [name of platform]. (Restaurant 3)

Simultaneously, as shown by the platform ➔ courier arrow in Figure 10.1, FD-Plat provides couriers with access to work through an almost unrestricted recruitment system. Couriers register online and usually access work through a shift system, reserving time slots for the upcoming week. Incoming orders are assigned to couriers by FD-Plat's algorithm, based on real-time data on client demand, restaurants and couriers' availability and location. Couriers can accept or cancel an incoming order and even have the option to cancel orders during the delivery process, hence benefiting from some flexibility:

> What makes working for [name of platform] so attractive is that it is flexible. […] I can work whenever I want […] I can also reject an order if it's too far, I choose that myself. (Courier 8)

Pay for non-peer-to-peer workers is calculated by the algorithm, taking into account real-time data on the street and traffic situation and hence allowing couriers to maximise their earnings, for example by mostly accepting long-distance orders. Finally, couriers can evaluate the delivery process through a rating mechanism. Most importantly, as illustrated by the courier ➔ restaurant arrow, couriers evaluate their waiting time when picking up food at restaurants:

> I have to say that it makes it easier that at the end of your shift you can always say 'this was not a nice delivery because the restaurant took too much time'. I think that [name of platform] is very responsive in this respect. When things go wrong, they will talk to the restaurant and see that things improve. (Courier 25)

The Disempowerment Cycle

At the same time, FD-Plat's rating and monitoring system fosters competition between restaurants as it generates comparisons among clients and couriers regarding time efficiency:

> Preparation time really depends on what I order. For example [name of restaurant] is really quick, it's like 5 minutes. But when I order for example pizza from an Italian restaurant, they take much more time, like 20 minutes. (Client 1)

> If I go to [name of restaurant] I have to wait there for 15 minutes. That is why I prefer accepting orders from restaurants where I only have to wait for 5 minutes, or from those where the food is ready when I arrive. (Courier 12)

As illustrated in the upper left-hand side of Figure 10.2, data on clients' and couriers' ratings are collected by FD-Plat and used to rank restaurants within

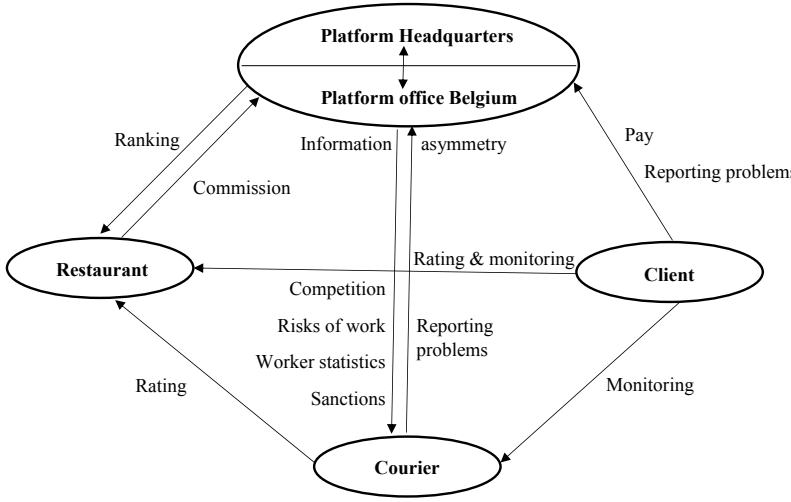

Figure 10.2: The Disempowerment Cycle. Diagram by the authors.

the client application, hence disempowering low-ranking restaurants. Each restaurant pays a commission on orders processed through the platform (usually around 30%). If ratings deteriorate, FD-Plat can increase the commission or even end the contract with the restaurant.

Moreover, as the share of external sales rises, restaurants become increasingly dependent on FD-Plat. Restaurant managers report suffering from the increased workload involved in dealing with incoming orders, which sometimes prompts them to prioritise delivery over serving clients seated, or to hire additional staff. This dependency is magnified by the lack of information on which courier delivers the food, making it harder to deal with delays:

> What often happens is that the order is ready, but the rider hasn't yet arrived. […] Then I think of the client, I think that there is a hot dish waiting and it's not our fault. […] In such cases, we sometimes call the client – we have the number on our tablet – to say that the order is ready, but the rider hasn't turned up yet. (Restaurant 1)

As shown in Figure 10.2, all payments are processed through FD-Plat. Clients pay the full cost (including delivery) to FD-Plat, which in turn pays the courier and the restaurant. Interviews with clients illustrate that they perceive this system as opaque and consider delivery quite expensive, hence they rarely tip the courier:

> I don't tip because each time I order I feel guilty, I'm a student, I can order, I can pay for the food, but if I pay tips also, it will be even more expensive. (Client 1)

Similarly, couriers lack information on who the client is and what their next order or waiting time will be. Peer-to-peer workers are further disempowered by having to accept orders without knowing the client's address, which is only provided to them once they have picked up the order at the restaurant. As illustrated by the courier/client ➔ platform arrows in Figure 10.2, both can report delivery problems to the platform via a chat-system, through both perceive this as largely ineffective as in most cases the answers given by the platform are standardised. Data collected through the chat are processed by FD-Plat to improve the delivery process. As delineated by the platform ➔ courier arrow, FD-Plat strategically fosters competition among couriers. This became particularly visible in 2018–2020, when FD-Plat recruited thousands of new couriers. FD-Plat hires couriers – as stated above under various self-employed statuses – with no social security coverage, hence 'obscuring' control and shifting economic risks to the couriers:

> There is always the major risk of being qualified as an employer. If the riders were then employees, they would lose their flexibility. (FD-Plat management)

Finally, relations with couriers are commodified through the use of individual performance statistics, introducing competition based on data about attendance, cancellation of shifts and working during 'peak hours', when clients place most orders. Bad statistics are sanctioned by deprioritising access to the shift system:

> You book your shifts on Monday and if you have bad statistics, then you can only start booking some hours later than the others. So then the shifts could actually be fully booked. (Courier 13)

> My statistics went down during the summer as I couldn't work then, so I no longer had an advantage over the other couriers. I had to wait a long time to be able to work again. (Courier 26)

Control and Subordination within Labour Platforms

The commodification strategies of empowerment and disempowerment discussed above contribute to labour control and subordination. As the platform fuels competition through the use of data, it restricts couriers' access to work, income and social security. With an easily scalable 'on-demand' workforce at its disposal, FD-Plat is able to efficiently adapt operations to client demand. Couriers' discretion over working time is limited through the use of statistics that induce them to ride on weekends or in bad weather conditions and to keep high attendance rates. FD-Plat restricts access to work and disciplines couriers through increased competition:

> Most shifts are booked now, that is a problem. So now it's actually less flexible, I can't simply say 'now I have nothing to do, now I will ride' […] I don't feel autonomous because I am clearly dependent on whether there is a slot or not. (Courier 17)

In the same vein, platform profits depend on couriers not being in charge of their access to their income. By paying only for completed orders, FD-Plat leaves couriers waiting for orders and/or during the delivery process without an income:

> What makes me really angry is when I go to a restaurant where you know you'll have to wait a long time, but because you don't get a lot of orders you accept it. Twenty-five minutes later, you're still standing there, having earned nothing for those 25 minutes. (Courier 31)

FD-Plats' distance-based payment system allows it to allocate couriers across a large catchment area of clients and restaurants. Economic incentives, such as extra pay for 'double orders' or 'bonuses', enable further efficiency gains for the platform. Changing the payment system for 'peer-to-peer' workers to a fixed fee significantly decreased their income. This is maintained through increased information asymmetries as couriers do not know beforehand the distance they have to ride:

> Now it's a rate of €4.36 for every order. And I took a few screenshots, I can show you how far we sometimes have to go for that! […] I lost 60% of my income in this new system. (Courier 37)

Finally, the platform's access to an 'on-demand' workforce is based on excluding couriers from social security:

> Once I got sick, I had a fever and I couldn't work. So I didn't respect the assigned hours and […] I ended up having no more work. […] I tried to explain to [name of platform] what happened, that I needed to work because I had no more income. They told me that there is nothing they can do because everything works through the algorithm. (Courier 21)

Discussion and Conclusions

The chapter adds to existing research by claiming that digital technology is strategically used by capital to commodify the complex relationships between users and workers and to enact control. Central to this argument is the fact that platforms use digital data to increase efficiency in labour allocation and in the decision-making of clients and restaurants. We examine how platforms

commodify the relationships between users and workers by illustrating the competition mechanisms accounting for commodification. We identify an 'empowerment cycle' through which the platform expands users' choices through marketisation and allows couriers to self-manage their working hours, and a 'disempowerment cycle' where the platform simultaneously constrains users and couriers through ratings and information asymmetries.

The platform thus offers freedom while exerting control, which has important implications for the production of subjectivity in platform capitalism (Armano, Teli and Mazali 2020). Our data illustrates that empowerment provides workers with some potential to act as agents, who often report experiencing autonomy in their work and sometimes identify as 'entrepreneurs'. However, we also show how this happens within the context of labour subordination to the platform. The platform controls and exploits workers, hence platform workers also experience exclusion from social protection and limited access to work and income. As labour is commodified, the algorithmic rating, monitoring and data processing mechanisms we identify translate into risks for couriers who continuously compete among themselves and are treated by the platform as 'on-demand' units. However, the same mechanisms also connect 'independently' existing workers and users with each other, giving rise to new relationships between them. The resulting experience of 'connectivity' might prompt workers and users to find new ways to organise and negotiate the conditions of their work (Leondardi et al. 2019).

The contribution of this chapter is twofold. First, we add to the critical strand of sociological literature which analyses the production relations within labour platforms, by illustrating the mechanisms of competition underpinning the commodification strategies through which labour is subsumed. Second, and directly linked to the former, we show how studying commodification is crucial to understanding the nature of 'work' in the platform economy. The current study focuses on one single platform within one single country. We therefore suggest the application of the empowerment-disempowerment cycles to different kinds of labour platforms as a potential direction for future research.

Acknowledgement

This publication is part of two interlinked research projects: ResPecTMe financed by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant Agreement number 833577), PI: Valeria Pulignano; and 'Precarious work in the on-line economy. A study on digital workers in Belgium and the Netherlands' financed by the Flemish Research Council, FWO (Flemish Research Council Project Number G073919N), PI: Valeria Pulignano.

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